

POLICY DEVELOPMENT SKILLS TRAINING COURSE FOR LOCAL POLICY MAKERS: IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS

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Introduction

The responsibilities of local governments in the former Soviet republics for the delivery of public services have been utterly transformed since the beginning of the transition period. While the extent varies, in all countries there has been substantial decentralization of responsibility from the center to localities.³ Russia is no exception. Local governments were ill prepared for their new task, particularly in terms of policy-making capacity. The situation has improved modestly, mostly through a learning-by-doing process. Nevertheless, policy analysis, program formulation, and program monitoring and evaluation skills remain very limited.

At the same time local advocacy NGOs, including think tanks in some cities, have emerged to champion specific causes and to promote more efficient and open government.⁴ In a number of cities, there is active cooperation between local government and certain NGOs, including NGOs acting as service providers under contract to the city, as well as those being involved in the policy making process. Nevertheless, there is still significant wariness by many local officials to NGOs. Overlaying this scene is the general lack of public policy skills at the local level. The result is that the quality of decision making is impaired compared to its potential.

The course described and assessed here is designed to improve local decision making by raising skill levels. A second objective is to strengthen working relationships between NGOs and government bodies through the inclusion of persons from both groups among the students. The course consists of a series of four workshops, each of two or three days devoted to strengthening policy analysis skills. Each workshop uses a problem-solving format, and groups of participants composed of officials and analysts work together on exercises that are a core part of the course. The course is now being presented in other cities.

During the spring of 2002 the course was offered in three municipalities in European Russia: Cheboksary, Kirov and Saratov. During fall 2002 – spring 2004 the Policy Fellows municipal course was presented to the municipal executives and NGO leaders in four municipalities: Tomskey Rayon, Togliatti City, two small towns in Penza Oblast- Kamenka and Kuznetsk and two cities in Primorsky krai - Ussuriisk and Nakhodka.

The Federal Course was presented on January 27 – February 7, 2003 to executives from four federal ministries (Ministry for Economic Development, Construction Committee, Labor Ministry and Property Ministry) and two NGOs.

The information presented is based on this experience.

Course Overview

At a general level, we followed the conventional approach to teaching policy analysis in the U.S.—to equip students “with intellectual tools to aid practitioners in the identification and specification of policy problems and the development of sensible, useful, and politically viable solutions” (deLeon and Steelman (2001, p. 164).⁵ A consistent market-oriented paradigm was employed.

Four Principles. The following principles guided the team in designing the curriculum and teaching the classes.

The ultimate objective is critical thinking. Many officials—in Russia and elsewhere—tend to operate at what might be termed “the descriptive level.” In other words, in discussing a problem they can describe a situation and outline a proposed policy, but they seldom reach the “analytic level” where the problem and potential solutions are analyzed in terms of incentives that affect behavior. Hence, the task of the course in general, and the faculty in particular, is to constantly challenge participants to defend their statements in terms of hard analysis of incentives, behavioral relations, and consistency with general principles of good management. For example, when discussing the structure of a program that provides income support and training to unemployed individuals, one must address the issue of the incentives on program participants’ effort to look for work embodied in the way the subsidy is structured. Or, when proposing to hold competitions to acquire certain

³ For a discussion of decentralization in the former Soviet bloc, see, for example, Kirchner (1999); Wallich (1994); Bird, Ebel, and Wallich (1995); Freinkman, Treisman, and Titov (1999); Horvath (2000).

⁴ For a comparative overview of developments in Russia, see USAID (2002); Charities Aid Foundation (1997).

⁵ This is consistent with similar views expressed by Lynn (2001) and Romero (2001).

services now provided on a monopoly basis by municipal firms, what are the incentives to support the initiative on the part of various municipal and private entities, and how could these affect the final outcome of the competitions.

This objective seems to be extremely relevant in the environment of administrative reform Russia as well as most of transition economies are passing through. There is a risk that without a “critical thinking” component the new requirements to state or municipal employees set by administrative reform will result only in new bureaucratic skills, use of a number of advanced administrative techniques.

Maximize the use of problems and case studies. Participants are adults, often persons approaching or already middle-aged. Most have not taken a formal class for years. Many hold senior positions and are used to frequently expressing their views. These points argue for classes that minimize formal lecturing and maximize the time devoted to working on concrete problems, case studies, and role plays in order to sustain student interest. The great majority of problems and examples were drawn from Russia.

Decide at the outset on the main analytic skills and policy principles to be conveyed and build the course around these. The team first determined the set of about ten skills and policy principles that students should master through participation in the course that are summarized in Table 1. These topics were selected based on the experience of the Urban Institute (UI-Washington) and the Institute for Urban Economics (IUE-Moscow) in working with Russian local officials on policy issues over the past decade, combined with our knowledge of public policy curricula.⁶

Rigorous scoring of homework and tests, and a minimum total score to pass the course. As seasoned administrators, the participants are used to attending seminars and conferences. Tests are seldom given, and certificates are distributed to all attending regardless of the level of participation. This can create a relaxed attitude about the necessity of applying one’s self to learning the material. The Policy Fellows course seeks to create greater commitment of students by increasing the value of receiving a certificate at the conclusion of the course.

⁶ An idea of the extensiveness of the experience can be gained from IUE’s *Annual Report* and other items on its web site, www.urbaneconomics.ru and from the descriptions of UI projects in Russia presented at www.urban.org/TPN.

Table 1
Course Objectives: Policy Principles and Skills

Subsidies. Different forms of subsidies; strengths and weaknesses of each. Illustrate various principles, e.g., consumer primacy.

Targeting. Strengths and weaknesses of alternative structures. Actual examples.

Incentives. Identifying and taking proper account of incentives to stakeholders as a key determinant of success in policy and program design. Stakeholder analysis.

Basic policy analysis process. This builds on the topics already discussed. An advantage of this order is that the students are exposed to immediately useful material before getting the more didactic presentation on the process of policy analysis. Includes defining the problem and weighting policy options against well-defined criteria.

Efficiency in the production of goods and services. Presentation of the basic economic concept. Stress proper role of government as setting the right environment (e.g., enforceable contracts) for most production but with a highly minimized actual production role. Introduce *contracting out* as an alternative to direct government delivery of services. Make arguments about the virtue of competition, etc.

Program monitoring. Rationale for program monitoring; give specific examples of use of monitoring information being useful to program management. Introduce modified log-frame for use in deciding what information should be collect and what reports to be produced for whom.

Data assessment techniques. Quality control in data assembly. This may be thought of as a sub-topic under monitoring or evaluation but the experience is that local officials do not review statistical tables for obvious errors that simple logical checks would identify.

Program implementation evaluation. Types of questions that can be addressed with process evaluation and why the answers are important for good program management. Examples of good practices. Class exercises for defining such evaluations.

Writing policy recommendations. Hones ability to analyze problems and clearly present recommendations. Opportunity to practice writing and critical thinking skills. Analyses of case studies require participants to use concepts from previous workshops.

To encourage mastery of the skills being taught requires that rules be announced and enforced. The class is informed of the scoring procedures at the outset: the minimum passing grade is 40 points out of total of 65 possible.⁷ Tests are administered at the end of each workshop and three homework assignments are distributed. Students receive continual feedback on their performance in the form of graded tests and homework assignments. Strong homework assignments are reviewed in class. The faculty discusses the general quality of the work submitted and is straightforward in their criticism where this is appropriate.

At the conclusion of the course, students who passed the course were awarded certificates at a graduation ceremony. To further increase the value of successful course completion, graduates are eligible to participate in an alumni association. This association of professional policy makers receives periodic newsletters is invited to attend policy-oriented events where course graduates from all the cities gather for an interesting policy-oriented event and to meet each other.

The Curriculum. The course outline is shown in Table 2. The order in which topics are covered is designed to help students accumulate skills. One session builds on the knowledge developed in the previous sessions. Therefore, it is extremely important for students to attend regularly. The final workshop—devoted to writing concise, effective policy recommendations—presents students with policy problems similar to those they have encountered in previous sessions. In each policy problem/case study, the policy issue is stated, its political context outlined, and options for addressing it developed. The student is then charged with the task of preparing a short (two-to-three page) recommendation for the direction to adopt—and to defend the recommended action. This strong emphasis on writing skills and preparation of policy recommendations is consistent with what is generally viewed as good practice in policy analysis courses.⁸

The full curriculum has been prepared in English and Russian, complete with instructor's notes, exercises, class handouts and problems, tests and evaluation forms.

Table 2

Policy Fellows Course Outline

Workshop 1: Critical Thinking about Public Programs and Subsidies

- Types of policy actions – focusing primarily on targeting and subsidies
- Stakeholder analysis – evaluating the interests/influence of different parties
- Policy Analysis Model – a six step process for analytical decision-making

Workshop 2: Efficient Public Programs

- The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government
- Models for carrying out government functions: direct provision, contracting out, and divestiture/privatization
- Designing contracting out for a concrete municipal service

Workshop 3: Program Monitoring and Evaluation

- Program monitoring – what to track, why, how?
- Program evaluation – assessing the implementation process and/or outcomes
- Using data effectively

Workshop 4: Preparing Policy Recommendations

- Writing and presenting policy recommendations

This also serves as an opportunity to review the Policy Analysis Model covered in the first workshop and allow participants to practice and demonstrate skills and ideas from throughout the course.

⁷ The 65 points are made up as follows: up to 10 points for each of four tests; up to 7 points for each of three homework assignments; and 1 point for each of five evaluation forms that the student submits.

⁸ See, for example, Musso, Biller, and Myrtle (2000).

Participants and Graduates

One hundred and twenty-six students participated in the course. Participants from the municipal governments in each city were appointed through a process directed by a deputy mayor. Most of the city officials held senior administrative positions, including that of deputy mayor, department chief, and deputy department head. We believe that most students had little information on the course before they attended the first class. To ensure strong support from the city administrations, city officials comprised about two thirds of participants. NGOs were recruited by IUE with some input from cities.

Some 72 percent successfully completed the course requirements. Unlike many professional training programs in Russia, Policy Fellows required participants to submit work and demonstrate mastery of the skills/materials covered in the course.

Certificates were not guaranteed to participants provided incentives for students to attend and apply themselves. Government officials and NGO representatives seemed to pass or fail at similar rates.

The course received strong support from the administration in each city. IUE staff met with the mayor or vice mayor in each city during the city selection process and the city leadership cooperated by appointing vice mayors and department heads to participate in the course. Cheboksary and Kirov organized press conferences during and at the end of the course.

Evaluation

The team conducted two types of evaluation of the course. First, at the conclusion of each workshop, students were requested to complete an evaluation form tailored to that workshop. In addition to inquiring about the format and quality of the presentations and materials, the form also asked questions about whether the material covered on specific topics was new to the student and how relevant students judged the topic to their work.

Second, to obtain further information on the impact of the course, the team tried to interview a random sample of students and their bosses in each city about five months after the completion of the course. The objective was to determine if the students had been able to use the materials they learned in their daily work.

As noted, participants completed evaluation forms at the end of each workshop and a final evaluation at the close of the course. *Quality of Course.* Using a five-point scale, participants rated the course with an average score of 4.86 (5=excellent) based on the quality of the materials, organization, exercises, and presentations.

Course Impact. The ultimate goal of the course is to improve how participants perform their jobs, specifically, that policy decisions will be made more analytically and programs will be designed and implemented more effectively. In evaluation forms completed after the final workshop, a surprising 89 percent of participants said that they had already applied skills derived from the course. Some of their specific examples of when they used the course are highlighted below:

“At the present time I work on socio-economic program development for Chuvashia municipalities. During the last three months my work was based on your course. On March 14, 2002, I led a meeting of directors of economic departments from different Chuvashia municipalities where we established a structure for policy/program development with the use of workshop materials. For the city of Cheboksary we worked out the city socio-economic program with the help of IUE experts.”

“Calculation of tuition fee for evening schools and calculation of prices for tickets to city entertainment facilities.” (Cheboksary)

“When I presented at the Cheboksary Regional Sport Committee the program on community sports facilities development ‘My yard is a sport yard.’ This program was awarded first place in the regional contest of innovative programs in youth policy.” (Cheboksary)

“Providing subsidies for housing and communal services and providing subsidies for individual housing construction.” (Cheboksary)

“Preparing a regional small-business development program.” (Kirov)

“Reexamined current programs. We also conducted a competition of social programs called ‘Kirov is a Cultural Capital for Youth’ (utilizing the following topics: targeting and stakeholder analysis).” (Kirov)

“Monitoring targeting of regional social programs.” (Saratov)

“Preparing for municipal procurement competition.” (Saratov)

“Very useful. Teamwork is not very popular in Russia, although now professional communities’ recognition of it is steadily growing. It is very important to hear other players, agree with and oppose them, find arguments in support of a specific theory or concept. The art of striking a compromise and using flexible approaches is also very important. And, of course, it is important to define your own role in the team in order to understand limits of your responsibility. Now I know how to improve my practice of teamwork. Thank you!” (Federal Course in Moscow).

The examples provided included items that were directly covered in the course (evaluation, targeting, competitive procurement, etc.), as well topics that were not specifically covered such as calculating tariffs – but for which presentations on benefit calculation, stakeholder analysis, and policy analysis may have contributed. That participants credited the course for helping them to prepare city and regional budgets, calculate tariffs, and analyze regional problems suggests that the broader principle of the course – rigorous analytical thinking – was successfully conveyed.

Institutionalization

Since 2002 a lot was done towards institutionalization of the Policy Fellows course.

In 2003-2004 IUE collaborated most productively with the Higher School of Economics and the Academy of National Economy. In November 2003, on the initiative of IUE, Chair of Urban Economics and Municipal Governance has been established within the Public and Municipal Administration Department of the Higher School of Economics. The Chair will become a base for promoting IUE educational products based on the Policy Fellows course.

One of the developed professional training programs, ‘Analytical Instruments of Social and Economic Policy Making’, inherited all basic components of Policy Fellows municipal and federal courses. The other developed course, Management of Municipal Socio-Economic Development, will also use lots of exercises and drills of these courses.

IUE study programs have been successfully accredited in the Higher School of Economics and Academy of People’s Economy. Negotiations have been held with a number of partners on organization of courses on commercial basis, including the World Bank Institute, Academy of People’s Economy of the Government of the Russian Federation, etc.

At the same time market analysis has demonstrated that there is a rather limited effective demand for the 72-hour-long course offered on commercial basis, although these limitations are not prohibitive. Co-financing of 30% of the cost with grant funds or other sources increases drastically commercial appeal of the product.

Market analysis has also demonstrated that shorter training products (3-5-day-long courses) based on the Policy Fellows course, if such are prepared, will be highly competitive on the respective service market.

A certain level of interest to the course emerged in several CEE and CIS countries. Options of using the course in technical assistance programs executed in these countries had been discussed with a number of clients. In 2003 and 2004 the team of UI – IUE trainers delivered the course twice in Bosnia and Hertsegovina (Sarajevo and Bania Luka). In 2005 the course will be taught in Kyrghyz Republic.

The Urban Institute specialists also prepared the 600 page textbook and a Teachers Manual on the basis of the Policy Fellows training course. The textbook was accepted for publication by Lynne Rienner Publishers.

The textbook has been translated into Russian and currently is being edited and adjusted to recent changes in Russian legislation by IUE experts. The meetings were held with representatives of publishing companies to discuss the conditions of publishing and the textbook dissemination. Russian publishers expressed certain interest in cooperation.

Conclusions

The results of the evaluation of the Policy Fellows course indicates that it was well-received by participants and that it fills a definite training need for local officials and staff at advocacy NGOs in Russia. More specifically, the topics were relevant and useful to participants' work and the method of instruction and organization of the course were highly rated. Participants credited the course with helping to "systematize" their approach to public policy issues, suggesting that the course's ultimate objective of fostering critical thinking has been met. In addition to this general shift towards analytical thinking, many participants offered concrete examples of how the course had assisted them in developing programs, designing monitoring programs, and facilitating competitions.

Since the staff of municipal governments throughout the CIS share the problem of their Russian counterparts in being poorly equipped for many of the duties that have been thrust upon them during the transition, an obvious question is whether the Policy Fellows course could be adopted for use elsewhere in the region. The short answer is "yes, with some effort." Success will likely rest on two elements: the curriculum and the instructors. With respect to the curriculum, the course is strongly oriented to Russia in its contextual material and examples in order to generate student interest. To be effective, even in other CIS countries, moderate changes would be needed in these areas so that the material would be immediately relevant to course participants.

Regarding the instructors, it would be wrong to assume that it would be possible for a university professor in a CIS country to take the Russian version of the course materials and effectively teach the course. Even with the large volume of notes and supplemental readings provided in the course materials, these materials are not a substitute for close study of textbooks or, even better, careful mentoring by an experienced policy practitioner. The team teaching method used by UI-IUE in the initial course offering provided the essential mentoring to two senior IUE staff members who already possessed a great deal of experience working with local officials on policy development and program implementation. Our recommendation is that this team-teaching model be followed in other countries.

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